

NEW YEAR'S RECEPTIONS

At the White House Since the Time of General Washington.

ONCE CALLED DRAWING ROOMS

And Levees, and Were Comparative-ly Simple Affairs—How Great George Received—Jefferson Bows to Feminine Social Mandates—Martha Washington's Terrible Housewifely Flight—Official Reception of Late Years.

Hotel Ball in Chicago Times.

This New Year's day in Washington was unlike any other New Year's day in the nation's capital in the last seventy years. For the first time in seven decades there was no official reception. The white house doors for the first time in seventy years were closed to the public. Death so recently passed through the portals that the fragrance of a gracious life gone out still lingers there, and the benefit are to be left alone a little longer with their memories.

It was a long time ago that presidents began holding "drawing rooms" on New Year's day. They were called "drawing rooms" at first, "leves" a little later, and are now styled "receptions." The very first New Year's reception ever held in Washington was on January 1, 1801, when the uncompleted white house was thrown open to the public, and President and Mrs. John Adams with quaint pomp and ceremony received the "curtises" of the curious people.

It was in 1823 that the now famous Marine band played for the first time in the white house, and it was on a New Year's day. In 1824, while Monroe was yet president, the white house was again opened for a New Year's levee, since which time its doors have never been closed that day, or, as would be the case in this instance, the day following, until now.

NO REFRESHMENTS.

New Year's receptions at the white house do not include refreshments, either liquid or solid. Only one President ever attempted a wholesale "feed" New Year's day, and that was Andrew Jackson. When "Old Hickory" came into power he inaugurated a new style of entertainment and served "hand-me-down" luncheons at his public receptions. A warm friend of his, a farmer "up in Jersey," once sent him a splendid cheese of mammoth dimensions. "Old Hickory" conceived the brilliant idea of treating his friends to this delicious tidbit. So New Year's day this cheese was ordered cut into "hunks" of a quarter of a pound each and served along with other edibles to the people who thronged the white house at the "drawing room." Half the cheese thus served was thrown upon the floor by the people who were abusing while enjoying the President's hospitality, and trampled into the carpets until the odor became almost unbearable. The carpets were ruined and had to be replaced. As it requires 515 yards to carpet the east room alone and the carpet has to be especially woven for the purpose, it will be seen that Mr. Jackson's receptions were expensive luxuries. When Mr. Van Buren entered the white house he very wisely discontinued the "feeding" process, and it has never since been resumed.

Another peculiar feature of those long-ago New Year's receptions at the white house was furnished by the society ladies. They were on that day for the first time their new winter bonnets and shawls. They didn't always have new dresses. Powers above, and shades of Worth! Think of a society woman of the present day being reduced to one suit of winter "toys," which she displays at the New Year's receptions at the white house!

PRESIDENT'S OFFICIAL RECEPTIONS.

The custom of keeping "open house" on New Year's day has largely fallen into disuse in private houses, but it is as much a part of official life in Washington as the inaugural ceremonies or the election of a speaker. The reception at the executive mansion begins about 11 o'clock a. m. At the vice president's callers begin to arrive at 12, or directly after leaving the white house, and the secretary of state and other cabinet officials are ready to receive about 1 o'clock.

The receiving party at the white house consists of the President and his wife, if he have one, and the wives of the cabinet officials. These constitute the "line." Behind the receiving party there is always a perfect crush of elegantly attired ladies and a sprinkling of gentlemen who are personally invited to assist "behind the line." After the Vice President and cabinet officials have paid their respects to the President and his party, the secretary of state takes his station at the President's left hand and in turn presents each member of the corps diplomatique. The foreign legations come first on the official programme after the cabinet. Then in turn comes the justices of the supreme court, members of Congress, the army, headed by the general commanding and his staff, the navy, with its ranking commodores at its head, civilians of the department service, representatives of the Grand Army of the Republic, and the oldest inhabitants. That ends the strictly official programme, and at 12:35 the great American public is turned into the line and is rushed past the receiving party at the rate of forty-five a minute, while the Marine band plays quick-step jigs.

At 2 o'clock the wide outer doors are closed in the face of the advancing populace, and as the last footfall dies away the band plays "Home, Sweet Home," and the President's New Year's reception is ended. In the three hours he shakes hands with nearly 5,000 people and the receiving ladies have each bowed about 4,000 times.

Immediately after the reception the President and his wife entertain at luncheon in the private dining room all the helpers who remain to the end of the reception. These are generally the ladies of semi-official standing who do not keep "open house" on that day. By 1 o'clock the wife of the vice president, as well as the wives of cabinet officials, retire from the receiving line so as to get to their homes in time to greet their own guests, who take the cabinet families in turn after leaving the white house.

THE CABINET RECEPTIONS.

The secretary of state usually entertains the diplomatic corps at a breakfast between 11 and 1 o'clock on New Year's day, and receives his friends later. From the house of the Vice President New Year's callers go in turn to the homes of the other cabinet officials in the "line of presidential succession."

The representatives of foreign powers usually do all their royal naves on January 1, and the army and navy is brushed and bathed to a wonderful

degree for the occasion. New Year's day without the resplendent embroidered uniforms, jeweled orders, and decorations of the diplomatic corps, and minus the gold cord, jingling swords, and blue bravery of the army and navy, will hardly seem New Year's at all to the denizens of Washington, who, if they may not look at the king, enjoy intensely the sight of those who represent the monarch as they fly about the official end of the city. And, "more's the pity," think the common folk, all these glittering trappings can only be worn on "official occasions."

The custom of holding presidential receptions dates back to Washington, and a laughable incident is related in connection with the first official reception of the father of his country. He was inclined to be exclusive, or perhaps it might more properly be termed "modest," and disposed to resent the impudent insistence of people who stopped at nothing in their endeavors to gain admission to his presence. As this class of people constituted a well-organized mob about his door every day in the year he was finally forced to set certain days upon which he would "review" the public, to prevent, as he said, "callers arriving before breakfast."

Mr. Jefferson, in writing of this first reception, relates the following:

Accordingly an ante-chamber and presence room were provided, and when those who were to pay their court were assembled the President set out preceded by Humphreys. After passing through the ante-chamber the door of the inner room was thrown open and Humphreys entered first, calling out in a loud voice, "The President of the United States."

The President was so much disconcerted by this that he did not recover in the whole time of the levee and when the company was gone he said to Humphreys:

"Well, you have taken me in a second time."

At that time no cards were issued to any of the president's receptions. Lady Washington, as the first lady of the land was then called, held a "drawing room" every Friday, at which the president usually supported her, though much against his will. Everything was stiff and ceremonious. The appointments of the presidential mansion were probably in keeping with the dignity of his office, but it was all primitive enough, as is shown by the letters of the president.

When John Adams came into power and took possession of the white house in 1800, the building of which Washington laid the corner stone in 1792, he found the executive mansion in a deplorable condition. The white house of that day was not the comfortable commodious structure of today. It was never an artistic success as to architecture, and its interior is quite impossible of effective decoration because of its vast expanse. As well room in a quarter section of prairie and endeavor to furnish it artistically as to make those billions of rooms look cozy and "home-like." At the present time the "red," "blue," and "green" rooms are at least harmoniously decorated in colors that do not "sweat" at each other, and the rich furniture is plentiful, even if it does look like fly specks on the floor in the amplitude of the east room. Then there are the magnificent mirrors, with their splendid gilt frames, and the Niagara-like chandeliers, and when the president's blue flag with its white embroidery is hung from the talons of a big eagle and the great columns are draped with flags and the beautiful marble mantels banked with flowers and ferns, even the east room forgets its nakedness and seems quite cheerful. It could not have been even cheerful in the time of the second president.

For twelve years the white house had been in process of erection. Yet when the seat of government was moved from Philadelphia to Washington, the executive mansion had not a single finished room, and only two or three finished rooms. The President and his official household came over by carriages, got lost in the woods, and wandered into Frederick, Md. When they reached Washington they found "no comfort" inside the "presidential palace." It was cold—the damp, piercing, clinging cold peculiar to the climate of that region. Yet fires could not be kept going sufficient to warm the President's household. The forest about Washington was dense, but laborers and carts were scarce, and all the coal to be had was brought in ships. Coal was plenty, but there were no grates in which to burn it. The President's wife felt the situation keenly and wrote pathetically to her daughter the week after her arrival in Washington:

The ship which contains my clothing and other matters has not arrived. The ladies are impatient for a drawing room, but I have not half enough lamps to light the rooms. Many things were stolen and many broken by the removal; among the number my tea china is more than half missing. Georgetown is a nothing. My rooms are comfortable and warm while the hall doors are shut. * * * And all this discomfort after twelve years of preparation to receive the greatest man of the age.

Amidst depressing surroundings like these the white house was thrown open for the first time and for the first New Year's reception ever given by the president or anybody else in Washington.

When Mr. Jefferson came into office he was opposed to presidential levees of all kinds, and announced his intention to abolish them, and inaugurate greater simplicity in official life. The Washington ladies, however, would not have it that way. In those days of "Jeffersonian simplicity" the capital city of the nation contained about 6,000 souls all told, and the official receptions were the bright spots in an otherwise dull existence. When the president closed his doors to the public the cabinet officials followed suit, and it was not to be endured for a moment.

On the formerly regular reception day a large number of ladies met at the white house and were told that the president was out riding. Nothing daunted, they marched in and awaited his return. He came in soon after and was informed of the raid that had been made upon him. He guessed its import, and bowed and smiled as he was with his clothing splashed with mud from neck to knees, he entered the reception room and welcomed the ladies in the most cordial manner. He expressed himself as most happy to meet them, and was never more charmingly agreeable. When they were about to take their departure he pressed each in turn to remain longer, and the ladies agreed that he had turned the tables upon them most beautifully. They never found it necessary, however, to repeat the visit.

Sir Augustus Foster, secretary of the British legation at that time, in writing about his novel experiences, says:

"In going to assemble we had to drive three or four miles within city bounds and very often at the risk of being overtaken or what is termed 'rattled,' when one can neither go back nor forward, and either lose one's wits or one's patience."

"Cases were not infrequently met of an evening and coming was the fashion, for many of the ladies who were invited were from Virginia or from the western states, and they were very fond of 'brag' the most charming of games. 'Love' was the innocent diversion of the ladies, who were very much interested in the word in a very winning manner."

"The great kindness of the president, generally speaking, was shown to me, and much for the fact that I was a Virginian."

But in spite of inconvenience and delay, it was, I think, the most agreeable day to spend in for any length of time. The opportunity of seeing the president, the senators and representatives from all parts of the country, the hospitality of the heads of government, and the such diplomatic duties of itself, was a day which could nowhere else be enjoyed.

MADISON'S BRILLIANT TERM.

The presidential levees during the time of Madison and his lovely wife,

"Dolly," are said to have been dreams of delight. There was no kind of formality whatever, and, from highest to lowest, everybody was received with charming grace. It was while Madison occupied the executive mansion that the British invaded Washington and burned the white house. Madison then rented the famous Octagon house, just east of the executive mansion, and here for nearly two years the most brilliant receptions ever held in Washington were given by Dolly Madison. It was in this old house that the treaty of Ghent was signed. The quaint old structure, built of brick brought from England, still stands, its dismantled rooms echoing with the ghostly voices and phantom foot steps of the gay crowds that once filled them with laughter and light. Tangled vines cover the queer windows which have so often framed Dolly Madison's sweet face, and the dust of more than half a century lies thick upon the old fashioned fresco.

When Mr. Monroe entered the white house in 1817 it was only partially restored and was not even comfortably furnished. Congress ordered Consul Lee, then residing in Paris, to purchase a silver service for the use of the president. This silver was used constantly until 1839, when a more modern set took its place. There was also ordered from Paris an elegant suit of furniture for the east room. The furniture was patterned after that in the palace of Louis XVI, and each piece was surmounted by the royal crown in gold. This was removed, however, and an eagle substituted before the furniture was sent on from France.

There is but one piece of furniture in the executive mansion which has come down from the first President, and that is the central ornament which is used on the banquet table on state occasions. It is a long mirror lake, with beautiful gilt bronze open-work railing embellished with exquisitely fashioned figures, and was purchased in France at a cost of \$1,100, which seems to have been considered a scandalously large sum to squander on such a work of art. It was purchased by the order of the first chief magistrate of the United States, and was first used by him on the occasion of a grand state banquet at the executive mansion in Philadelphia in 1791. It is now more than a century since the elegant ornament was first placed upon Washington's table, but not one jot of its beauty has faded.

During Monroe's time the white house was considered the most cheerful place in Washington, "little better than a barn," as some foreign visitors styled it. Yet as late as 1842 a magazine of that year advocated the sale of the executive mansion to the Smithsonian institute organization and said:

Let the residence of the president be transferred to a more modest mansion, and the only wonder would soon come to be, how we could ever have so long tolerated to see and hear of the "palace of the president."

MRS. MONROE'S RECEPTION.

Mrs. Monroe was a woman of frail health, and could mingle but little in society, but the fortnightly levees were kept up. Coopersays of these receptions:

No invitation was necessary, it being the usage for the wife of the president to receive company once a fortnight during the season without distinction of person. . . . I will acknowledge my surprise at the respectable air and deportment of the assembly. The evening at the white house, or drawing room as it is sometimes pleasantly called, is in fact, a collection of all classes of people who choose to go to the trouble and expense of dress suitable to an ordinary evening party. I am not sure that even dress is much regarded, for I saw there a good many wearing boots. The females were all properly attired, but few were ornamented with jewelry, of course. The poor and laboring classes would find little pleasure in such a scene, and the infamous, if known, would be admitted, for it is a peculiar consequence of the high moral tone of this country that grave and notorious offenders rarely presume to violate the public feelings by invading society.

It was New Year's day, 1839, that Mrs. Abram Van Buren, the lovely bride of the son and private secretary of the president, was introduced to Washington society as the mistress of the white house. She is described as having been "a lady of rare accomplishments, very modest, yet perfectly easy in her manners and vivacious in conversation. She was universally admired, and bore the fatigue of a three hours' levee with patience and pleasant-ty which must indeed be inexhaustible to last one through so severe a trial."

It was at a levee during the time of President Tyler that Washington Irving and Charles Dickens had their notable meeting, and the *Madisonian* said of these receptions:

It seems to us that these levees, as now conducted, are peculiarly adapted to the genius of our republican institution, inasmuch as all who please may attend without infringement of etiquette.

These public receptions were notable features of Washington life during the Arthur and Cleveland administrations, and never since they were hung have the white house doors been swung open more frequently to admit the public than during the present administration.

The social features of official life in Washington are growing more democratic every year. At the public receptions America brushes shoulders with Africa, and no criticisms are passed, no invidious distinctions shown. But yesterday in Washington, with the shadow of a sorrow hanging over the head of the chief magistrate, was quieter than ever before in the history of the white house.

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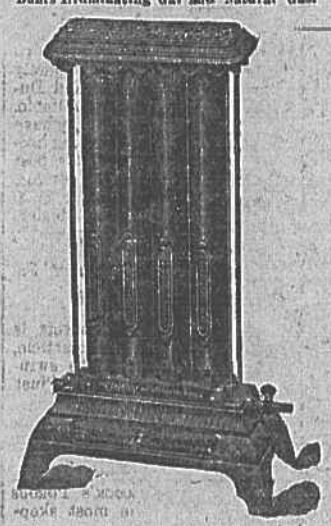
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